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Ottoman Nostalgia in Turkey's African Engagement: A Contemporary Analysis

Abstract

Turkey's engagement with Africa represents a dynamic interplay between historical memory, cultural diplomacy, and geopolitical strategy. Central to this relationship is the mobilisation of Ottoman nostalgia, which Turkey uses to construct a narrative of Islamic solidarity and historical continuity. This paper adopts a multidisciplinary framework, integrating historical research, anthropological theory, and international relations, to analyse how Turkey instrumentalises its Ottoman past to enhance its influence on the continent. This study examines how historical and cultural narratives strategically shape political realities and foster soft power. By reviving a selectively constructed Ottoman past, Turkey aligns its historical interpretation with contemporary ambitions, framing its African engagement as a natural extension of shared heritage. However, this narrative often marginalises the pluralistic and negotiated nature of Ottoman governance and the agency of African actors in shaping their histories. Through a critical examination of Turkey's multifaceted approach — spanning infrastructure investments, cultural initiatives, and religious solidarity — this paper elucidates the motivations and consequences of Turkey's expanding footprint in Africa. It argues that Ottoman nostalgia is a commemoration and a pragmatic tool for advancing Turkey's global aspirations, highlighting the intersection of memory, culture, and geopolitics in contemporary international relations.

Keywords

Ottoman Nostalgia, Neo-Ottomanism, Ottoman-Africa, lieux de mémoire, Soft-Power

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Introduction

Turkey's growing engagement with Africa reflects a complex interplay between historical memory, cultural diplomacy, and geopolitical strategy. At the heart of this engagement lies a phenomenon known as Ottoman nostalgia—not merely a romantic recollection of imperial grandeur but a strategic reconstruction of the Ottoman legacy to serve contemporary state interests (Yavuz 2020; Çevik 2024; Ergin and Karakaya 2020). This form of nostalgia is best understood as a state-driven affective and discursive formation, selectively mobilised to legitimise foreign policy initiatives, particularly in Africa. By invoking narratives of Islamic solidarity and historical continuity, Turkey positions itself as both culturally proximate and politically legitimate on the continent.

Crucially, this Ottoman nostalgia reflects an active process of remembrance, conceived as a performative practice—materially enacted, symbolically charged, and institutionally embedded.

The Turkish state actively reanimates imperial memory by restoring architecture, commemorative events, cultural diplomacy, and projecting religious and linguistic affinities. These performances do not simply recall a shared past; they construct it in ways that align with Turkey's geopolitical ambitions. In this context, nostalgia becomes less about looking back and more about strategic future-making, a form of prospective statecraft that frames Turkey's presence in Africa as a natural extension of a shared historical continuum.

As noted by Gehler and Rollinger (2022a), empires do not vanish with political decline; they endure as discursive resources for modern nation-states. Turkey's selective reimagining of the Ottoman Empire exemplifies this dynamic. By portraying the Empire as an inclusive and unifying force, Ankara presents itself as a credible and benevolent actor in Africa. However, this reconstruction often simplifies the complex governance of the Ottoman system, overlooking its pluralistic and negotiated nature (Uluışık Arabacı 2022). The risk lies in reducing the Empire's multi-ethnic legacy to a uniquely Turkish narrative, marginalising Arab, Balkan, and African contributions (Melis 2024). This selective memory reflects broader global patterns as various actors reframe imperial pasts to reinforce modern legitimacy and connectivity (Winter 2022).

The theoretical lens of Pierre Nora's lieux de mémoire helps clarify how memory is actively constructed rather than passively inherited (Nora 1989). Jeremy Walton (2016) extends this framework to the Ottoman context, showing how symbolic spaces—such as restored mosques or commemorative events—

become tools for contemporary identity-building and geopolitical projection.

In the African context, various actors recontextualise these lieux de mémoire not merely as cultural heritage sites but as diplomacy instruments. Turkey's restoration of Ottoman-era monuments and sponsorship of cultural projects thus function as a symbolic performance and soft power strategy.

These theoretical insights are evident in Ankara's practical diplomacy. State institutions and cultural actors do not treat historical artefacts and narratives as remnants of the past but as tools for shaping national identity and asserting international legitimacy. This strategy reflects a deliberate transformation of cultural memory into diplomatic capital. Restorative projects and cultural celebrations are framed not as aesthetic or nostalgic gestures but as acts of statecraft designed to suggest a continuity of imperial benevolence.

Winter's concept of geo-cultural power (2019; 2022) further clarifies this process. Turkish diplomacy in Africa blends development aid, economic cooperation, and religious-cultural affinity into a narrative of shared heritage. This narrative serves as an alternative to the legacy of Western colonialism, presenting Turkey as a non-imperial actor invested in mutual development. The discourse highlights historical connections while projecting Turkey's role as a mediator between past and present, tradition and modernity.

In parallel, Gehler and Rollinger's emphasis on the enduring force of imperial discourses illustrates how Turkey's mobilisation of Ottoman memory is not arbitrary but selective and purposeful.

Actors amplify elements reinforcing a narrative of inclusivity and regional leadership while downplaying those complicating this vision. This curated narrative turns the Ottoman past into a flexible resource—an active component of foreign policy rather than a historical residue.

The synthesis of these perspectives shows how cultural memory, symbolic space, and strategic interest coalesce in Turkey's engagement with Africa. Nora and Walton's focus on symbolic reactivation, Winter's framing of cultural diplomacy as soft power, and Gehler and Rollinger's attention to imperial discourses collectively reveal how Ottoman nostalgia operates as a multidimensional instrument of statecraft.

A central feature of this strategy is Turkey's rhetorical differentiation from historical colonial powers. Through summits such as the Turkey–Africa Partnership Summits, Ankara presents itself as a non-colonial partner committed to equality and mutual development (Tepeciklioğlu, Vreÿ, and Baser 2024; Palabıyık 2021). Rather than explicitly invoking Ottoman imperialism, Turkish

officials emphasise shared religious and cultural ties. In a 2016 speech alongside Guinean President Alpha Condé, President Erdoğan remarked, "Under the posh pavements of the western countries' capitals, there are tears and blood of our African brothers," contrasting Turkey's approach with Europe's exploitative past and invoking a narrative of moral solidarity[1].

This discourse positions Turkey as a unique partner, free from the colonial baggage of the West. However, while this rhetoric appeals to African audiences, it often obscures deeper structural asymmetries. Though framed as collaborative, Turkey's development aid, educational programs, and cultural outreach frequently reproduce hierarchies reinforcing Turkey's benefactor and cultural centre role. The symbolic gestures of solidarity coexist with practices centralising Turkish authority, creating a subtle but persistent tension between egalitarian discourse and hegemonic ambition.

This ambivalence reveals the dual character of Ottoman nostalgia. On the one hand, it fosters unity and shared identity; on the other, it functions as a mechanism of soft hegemony, reinforcing Ankara's geopolitical influence under the guise of historical affinity.

This dynamic produces a complex diplomatic architecture in which states and institutions mobilise historical narratives to blur the boundaries between solidarity and dominance.

This strategic ambiguity requires a critical reassessment of Turkey's foreign policy discourse. While invoking a non-colonial and human-oriented approach, implementing these policies reflects asymmetrical power dynamics. Rather than simply recovering a shared past, Ottoman nostalgia becomes a tool for reshaping present-day hierarchies. Therefore, the selective invocation of imperial memory can simultaneously unite, differentiate, legitimise and marginalise.

This paper adopts an interdisciplinary approach to analysing Turkey's African policy, drawing on historical research, anthropology, and international relations insights. Winter's concept of geo-cultural diplomacy situates Turkey's actions within global patterns of memory-driven statecraft, while Walton's analysis of symbolic space underscores the performative nature of Ankara's cultural diplomacy. Gehler and Rollinger's work on imperial continuity adds a further layer, highlighting how the Ottoman past functions not as a relic but a strategic asset.

Turkey's deployment of Ottoman nostalgia in Africa illustrates how historical narratives are mobilised not as retrospective reflections but as forward-looking tools for political engagement. Political and cultural actors selectively and

strategically remember and reinvent the past to support Turkey's image as a legitimate, moral, and influential actor on the international stage.

While this paper primarily examines the Turkish state's strategic mobilisation of Ottoman memory, it does not extensively address the role of African agency—how African actors interpret, negotiate, appropriate, or resist these narratives within their own historical, cultural, and political imaginaries. This study should thus be understood as a preliminary intervention within a broader analytical trajectory to explore the role of historical reinvention and narrative construction in Turkey-Africa relations. The analysis is informed not only by memory and postcolonial studies but also by scholarship in political anthropology, cultural diplomacy, and soft power theory, illuminating the performative, relational, and often asymmetrical dynamics at play. Future research will critically engage with the dialogic and contested nature of these processes, foregrounding the agency of African actors in shaping, translating, and, at times, subverting Ankara's neo-Ottoman projections across the continent.

Turkish Soft Power and Africa: a Multi-dimensional Partnership Strategy

After the Cold War, Turkey underwent a significant shift in its global orientation. Weakening its aspirations to lead the Turkic world and its efforts to join the European Union, Turkey redirected more and more of its attention towards Africa (Akpek 2018; Dahir 2021; Donelli 2018; 2021; Uchehara 2018a)[2].

As articulated in government statements, Turkey's official approach to Africa positions the continent as a critical component of its multi-dimensional foreign policy (Oprea 2022; Özkan 2018). According to Turkish official narratives, Africa plays an increasingly significant role on the global stage, both economically and geopolitically (Uchehara 2018b). Ankara frames its role in Africa as a mutually beneficial relationship grounded in historical ties and shared humanitarian values. Emphasising the principle of "African solutions for African problems", Turkey presents its strategy as based on partnership, mutual respect, and promoting peace and development across the continent.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has described Turkey's African policy as part of its broader commitment to global equity. In his speeches during his visits to Africa, Erdoğan emphasises that "[a] more just world is possible", positioning Turkey as an ally in Africa's struggle against the legacy of colonial exploitation. He argues that Turkey's approach is distinct from traditional

Western strategies, highlighting that "Turkey's engagement with Africa stems not from colonial ambitions but from our shared history and solidarity"[3].

On 13 October 2023, at the Closing Ceremony of the 4th Turkey-Africa Business and Economic Forum held at the Istanbul Congress Centre, Erdoğan expressed his delight in hosting the forum in Istanbul, a city celebrated as a cradle of civilisation, history, and culture. He also stated that despite their deep-rooted history with African countries, Turkey had lost its ties with the African continent. However, a new era of Afro-Turkish relations started at the beginning of the new millennium. In the same closing speech at the 2023 Forum, he added, "[u]ndoubtedly, the conditions of our country and the continent were effective in this. In the first years of our Republic, our country, which was exhausted from the wars that lasted for many years, primarily dealt with domestic issues and tried to heal its wounds. However, even in that period, Turkey never turned its back on Africa and African peoples. We strongly supported the freedom movements in the continent, especially in North African countries, despite the challenging conditions of the period. Somehow, we endeavoured to maintain our contacts with African peoples".

Wishing the meeting to be auspicious, President Erdoğan continued claiming that "[a]s the Turkish nation, we have strong ties with African peoples dating back to the 10th century. Centuries-old mosques, libraries, inns and harbours built in different cities of the continent are only some of the signs of the ancient friendship between us. Traces of our common history can be found in every corner of the continent, from Sudan to Libya, from Harar to Timbuktu. We know that many Ottoman citizens of African origin fought shoulder to shoulder with our ancestors in the defence of the homeland in WWI ("Cihan Harbi"). It is another historical fact that our War of Independence against the invaders instilled courage and inspiration in African peoples' struggle for freedom[4]".

The origins of Turkey's formal African policy can be traced back to the "African Initiative Policy" launched in 1998. According to Turkish government sources, this initiative aimed to strengthen diplomatic, economic, and cultural ties with African nations. The policy began to gain momentum in the early 2000s when Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AK Parti*) came to power in 2002 (Donelli 2021; Eyrice Tepeciklioğlu, and Tepeciklioğlu, Aydogan Unal 2018; Özkan, Akgün 2010). Turkish African relations have grown significantly since Ankara proclaimed 2005 "the Year of Africa". This policy coincided with Turkey's aspirations to carve out a role as a "virtuous power," combining soft power tools such

as humanitarian aid and cultural diplomacy with economic investments and military partnerships (Heibach, and Taş 2024; Donelli 2021: 112).

Moreover, Turkey aims to position itself as a pertinent regional and global actor, distinct from traditional Western players on the continent. In 2008, Turkey became an observer member of the African Union and subsequently attained the status of a strategic partner. Turkish officials highlight this period as a shift towards deeper presence, resulting in increased trade, development projects, military cooperation, and humanitarian aid[5]. By 2013, Turkey had replaced the "African Initiative Policy" with the "Africa Partnership Policy," which remains the foundation of Turkey's engagement with Africa[6].

Erdoğan's repeated visits to the continent—36 official trips by 2024—highlight the high-level diplomatic role that defines Turkey's Africa strategy. His message often reiterates solidarity and mutual growth, stating, "Our aim is to walk together, grow together, and win together".[7] These visits coincide with a massive expansion of Turkey's diplomatic presence in Africa, with embassies growing from 12 in 2002 to 44 by 2022. The reciprocal growth of African diplomatic missions in Turkey, from 10 in 2008 to 39 in 2024, is framed as further evidence of the strength of the partnership (Donelli 2021: 143).

The Turkish government also emphasises the rapid expansion of trade and investment ties with Africa. Official figures indicate that trade volume between Turkey and Africa increased from USD 5.4 billion in 2003 to USD 34.5 billion in 2021. Erdoğan has actively encouraged infrastructure investments, asserting, "[i]t is time to bring together our potential to support sustainable development across Africa"[8]. Donelli underscores that this expansion is not merely economic but part of a broader strategy to position Turkey as a "middle power" capable of influencing global governance through strategic partnerships (Donelli 2021: 100)[9].

Education and capacity-building initiatives also remain central to Turkey's engagement on the African stage[10]. Since 1992, over 15,000 African students have received scholarships to study in Turkey, which the government describes as "an investment in Africa's human capital"[11].

During his visits, Erdoğan further reinforced this narrative, presenting educational cooperation as a long-term strategy to strengthen bilateral ties. Yet, this educational focus cultivates pro-Turkey elites, aligning with Ankara's long-term soft power ambitions (Donelli 2021: 131). The Turkish government frames this educational exchange as a long-term investment in Africa's human capital to strengthen bilateral ties and foster mutual understanding. Turkey's "Diplo-

macy Academy" also offers training programs for African diplomats, further contributing to capacity-building efforts in African countries[12].

Memory and Political Strategy

The strategic use of historical memory in Turkey's policies towards Africa reveals how narratives are actively shaped to align with current political and cultural objectives. Rather than passive recollections, these narratives selectively emphasise aspects of the past that bolster Turkey's ambitions while omitting or minimising more controversial elements. In this context, memory functions as a political tool, embedding historical symbols within the framework of contemporary influence.

One notable example is the restoration of Ottoman-era mosques, which serve both symbolic and practical roles in Turkey's strategy[13]. These restored sites, such as the Mosques in Mogadishu[14], embody a vision of continuity between past and present: "a bridge between our peoples, a testament to our shared history, and a promise of our shared future"[15], according to Erdoğan, whose speeches during such events often frame these projects as acts of cultural diplomacy that strengthen bonds between Turkey and African nations. This rhetorical positioning allows Ankara to present its initiatives as extensions of a shared historical legacy rather than new geopolitical manoeuvres[16] (Pektaş 2012).

However, this curated memory has its omissions. By foregrounding themes of Islamic unity and Ottoman benevolence, Turkey's narrative glosses over aspects of Ottoman governance that may complicate its self-presentation as a benign actor. For example, the Ottoman Empire's imperial practices in North and East Africa, which occasionally resembled those of European colonial powers, are excluded from Ankara's contemporary rhetoric (Uluışık Arabacı 2022; Melis 2019; Kavas 2001). This selective representation underscores how memory can connect and exclude, reinforcing narratives prioritising strategic interests.

Jeremy Walton's analysis of the post-imperial effect offers valuable insights into how states reinterpret historical legacies for contemporary purposes. Walton examines how lieux de mémoire transform into symbols of continuity and legitimacy, demonstrating their utility in navigating geopolitical aspirations (Walton 2021: 3-5). In Turkey's case, such sites serve as cultural markers and instruments for projecting soft power and asserting its identity as a historically embedded actor in Africa.

Turkey constructs a narrative that balances cultural resonance with political ambition by strategically invoking Ottoman memory. This calculated approach highlights the dual role of memory as both a unifying force and a mechanism for asserting influence, themes that will be expanded upon in the following sections. Unlike other forms of imperial nostalgia—such as British "Commonwealth nostalgia" or the French "mission civilisatrice"—Ankara primarily mobilises Ottoman memory as a narrative of cultural and religious continuity rather than an explicit strategy of political domination.

Islamic and Neo-Ottoman Narratives: a Dual Framework in Turkey's African Engagement

Turkey integrates Islamic solidarity and neo-Ottoman heritage into its strategy for engaging with Africa, creating a dual framework that appeals to diverse audiences across the continent (Umut 2020). While grounded in historical and religious ties, this narrative is instrumental in projecting Ankara as both a spiritual leader and a custodian of shared history. The interplay between these discourses reinforces Turkey's soft power, enabling it to consolidate its influence while advancing broader geopolitical ambitions.

The Islamic discourse is a cornerstone of Turkey's approach, fostering solidarity through shared religious values and traditions (Gontijo, and Barbosa 2020; Calabrò 2017). Institutions such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA)[17], the Directorate of Religious Affairs or *Diyanet*[18] (Kaya 2018), and the Research Centre for Islamic History, Art and Culture (IRCICA) are central to this effort. These organisations promote development aid, religious education, and mosque construction, aligning Ankara's actions with the socio-religious fabric of African nations. For example, TIKA frequently frames its development initiatives in the language of the Islamic fraternity, presenting Turkey as a benevolent and culturally aligned partner.

Similarly, *Diyanet* has expanded its presence across Africa, building mosques, training imams, and facilitating interfaith dialogue (Donelli 2021). At the Third Summit of African Muslim Religious Leaders held in October 2019, *Diyanet* reiterated Turkey's commitment to fostering a universal Islamic community (Umma), a theme often highlighted in its sermons. On the anniversary of the 2016 coup, a sermon proclaimed Turkey as "the last fortress of the Islamic Umma," linking its survival to the prayers of oppressed communities from Gaza to Somalia and Pakistan to the African continent (Yilmaz,

and Albayrak 2022: 144-145). This narrative underscores Turkey's ambition to position itself as a leader within the Muslim world, resonating particularly in regions where Islamic identity remains central to governance and society.

Ankara's engagement with Sufi brotherhoods further illustrates the strategic deployment of its Islamic identity. Sufi traditions, deeply embedded in many African societies, offer Turkey an avenue to establish cultural and religious ties while fostering alliances with local elites (Dollar 2012; Öztürk 1988). Before 2016, the Gülen movement's *Hizmet* schools were pivotal in this outreach, promoting Turkey's image as a modern Islamic state (Weller 2022; Shinn 2015; Pongiluppi 2014; Angey 2012). Although the fallout with the Gülen network necessitated a shift in strategy[19] (Mercan 2017), Ankara has continued to engage African societies through scholarships for students and training programmes for religious leaders, ensuring the continuation of its influence via non-state actors (Akdemir 2018).

While the Islamic discourse forms the foundation of Ankara's outreach to the African continent, neo-Ottomanism adds a historical dimension that enhances its appeal. By invoking the Ottoman Empire's legacy, Ankara constructs a narrative of historical continuity, positioning Turkey as a natural partner for African nations (Donelli, and Cannon 2021). This narrative draws heavily on the Empire's historical presence in North Africa and the Horn of Africa, portraying it as a unifying force that contrasts with the divisive legacies of European colonial powers.

The rhetoric of Ottoman pluralism is central to this narrative. During the 19th century, Ottoman policies institutionalised a system of negotiated sovereignty, managing diversity through cooperation with local elites. This historical framework, often idealised in contemporary Turkish rhetoric, positions Ankara as a leader capable of fostering unity while respecting cultural and religious diversity (Lafi 2024; Lafi 2002). However, this narrative is highly selective, omitting fewer flattering aspects of Ottoman rule, such as exploitative practices and involvement in the slave trade (Oualdi 2020; Minawi 2016). By foregrounding benevolence and coexistence, Turkey constructs a simplified historical narrative that reinforces its soft power. While Suakin Island exemplifies the neo-Ottoman heritage framework, mosque restorations reinforce Turkey's Islamic solidarity narrative across Africa.

Restoring Ottoman-era mosques[20] and landmarks is a tangible expression of this dual discourse. Projects like the Murat Ağa Mosque in Libya[21], the Abdülaziz Mosque in Mogadishu, and the Suakin Island restoration in Sudan

highlight Ankara's commitment to preserving cultural memory while advancing its strategic interests. These *lieux de mémoire* commemorate shared history and strengthen Turkey's ties with local communities. Erdoğan frequently describes such initiatives as "symbols of unity and cooperation," aligning them with Turkey's broader narrative of cultural diplomacy (Çalık Orhun 2019; Nour 2005).[22]

Suakin Island exemplifies how neo-Ottoman and Islamic narratives converge in Turkey's strategy. Located on the Red Sea, Suakin served as a critical Ottoman outpost, and its restoration underscores Ankara's commitment to cultural preservation and geopolitical influence. By reclaiming Suakin's historical significance, Turkey asserts its presence in a geopolitically sensitive region, reinforcing its claims of historical ties to Africa while advancing its contemporary strategic goals (Peacock 2012).

This dual framework enables Turkey to position itself as a unique African actor, distinct not only from Western colonial powers and emerging global competitors like China[23] and Russia but also from other influential players seeking to establish themselves in Africa as champions of Islamic values, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran[24]. By framing its engagements as culturally and historically rooted, Ankara appeals to African leaders seeking alternatives to transactional partnerships. The Islamic narrative resonates particularly in regions with significant Muslim populations. At the same time, the neo-Ottoman rhetoric extends Turkey's appeal to broader audiences, offering a vision of governance and partnership grounded in mutual respect.

However, this strategy has its contradictions. The selective invocation of history and religion often obscures asymmetrical power dynamics, where Turkey's influence is framed as equitable but operates within a context of strategic dominance. By blending Islamic solidarity with Ottoman nostalgia, Ankara crafts a cohesive narrative that masks the complexities of its engagement while consolidating its position in a competitive global landscape (Walton et al. 2020; Winter 2022).

The Concept of 'Ottoman Africa': Academic and Political-Theological Dimensions

The concept of 'Ottoman Africa' (*Afrika-yi Osmani*) provides a dual framework, blending academic analysis of historical ties with its contemporary use as a tool in Turkish foreign policy. Initially conceptualised within educa-

tional circles, it has evolved into a narrative that bridges historical memory and modern geopolitical ambitions. This dual role underscores the dynamic relationship between scholarly discourse and state-driven objectives (Lafi 2024).

In its historical dimension, 'Ottoman Africa' encompasses territories directly or indirectly linked to the Ottoman Empire from the 16th century onwards, particularly in North Africa and the Horn of Africa (Melis 2024; Loualich 2013; Merouche 2002-2007; Uğur 2005; Orhonlu 1974). Ottoman influence in these regions was marked by a flexible approach to governance, relying on negotiated sovereignties and partnerships with local elites (Özbaran 2009). African agency was pivotal in shaping this model of governance. Local rulers, such as the beys of Tunis and Algiers or the sharifs of Mecca, actively negotiated their roles within the imperial framework, ensuring that their autonomy was preserved even as they contributed to the Empire's political and economic networks. Far from being passive recipients of Ottoman authority, these actors shaped imperial policies to reflect their own interests, demonstrating the centrality of African agency in sustaining Ottoman governance. This strategy allowed the Empire to integrate diverse societies into its networks while maintaining a degree of regional autonomy (Lafi 2015).

Recent scholarship, particularly within postcolonial and decolonial frameworks, has highlighted the trans-imperial networks that connected African territories with Istanbul. These include trade routes spanning the Sahara, intellectual exchanges through Islamic scholarship, and the integration of African leaders into Ottoman religious and political institutions. Such studies challenge Eurocentric historiographies, which often marginalise Ottoman contributions, instead positioning Africa as a central player in the Empire's geopolitical strategies (Minawi 2016; Oualdi 2020). The Saharan and Red Sea corridors, for example, illustrate how African merchants, scholars, and political actors facilitated the flow of goods, ideas, and authority, actively shaping the Ottoman presence in these regions. These interactions were not unidirectional but reflected a reciprocal exchange where African actors contributed significantly to the Empire's religious, economic, and cultural policies.

The broader conceptualisation of 'Ottoman Africa' extends beyond territories under direct Ottoman rule. Regions like Kanem-Bornu (Dewiere 2017) and Zanzibar (Uğur 2005), which maintained significant diplomatic and religious ties with the Empire, illustrate how Ottoman influence transcended formal administrative boundaries. African agency in these contexts was evident in how local rulers engaged with the Ottoman court to secure support for their politi-

cal ambitions, as seen in diplomatic correspondences and religious exchanges. This expanded perspective challenges traditional separations between North (Temime 2013; Loualich 2013; Moalla 2003; Temimi 1996;) and sub-Saharan Africa, framing the Ottoman Empire as a transregional power with deep and multifaceted connections across the continent (Medici 2019). It also underscores the importance of recognising African contributions to shaping these transregional networks, whether through local governance, trade facilitation, or cultural exchanges.

While this academic re-examination enriches our understanding of the Ottoman past, it has also been appropriated within contemporary Turkish foreign policy. Under Erdoğan's leadership, the 'Ottoman Africa' concept has been deployed to legitimise Turkey's expanding role on the continent. By invoking the Ottoman Empire as a unifying and protective force, particularly for African Muslim communities, Ankara constructs a narrative of continuity that positions Turkey as a natural partner for African nations. However, this narrative often minimises the active role of African actors in shaping their relationships with the Ottomans. It overlooks how African rulers and communities navigated Ottoman politics to their advantage, ensuring that their agency remained intact even in contexts of imperial dominance.

Turkey's cultural diplomacy reinforces this narrative by leveraging Ottoman heritage to strengthen its relationships with African nations. Restoration projects, including mosques and other architectural landmarks, serve as tangible reminders of shared history and provide Ankara with symbolic platforms for engagement. These efforts align with the broader strategy of framing Turkey as a non-colonial partner, distinct from European powers. Yet, these projects are not always accepted uncritically by African communities. In many cases, local actors reinterpret such initiatives to reflect their own cultural priorities and historical narratives, demonstrating how African agency continues to shape the legacy of Ottoman Africa in contemporary contexts.

Figures such as Ahmet Kavas exemplify the integration of academic and political-theological dimensions within the 'Ottoman Africa' concept. As both a scholar and a diplomat, Kavas highlights the Ottomans' role in defending African Muslims from European imperialism, framing the Empire as a protector of Islamic civilisation. While grounded in historical research, his work aligns closely with Turkey's strategic objectives, illustrating how academic narratives can be mobilised for political purposes (Kavas 1999, 2001). This alignment is not unique to Kavas but reflects a broader trend within Turkish academia,

where studies on Africa increasingly intersect with state-led initiatives.

The development of African studies in Turkish universities further demonstrates this intersection. Historically underrepresented, the field has experienced significant growth alongside Turkey's strategic pivot towards Africa. Government funding for research initiatives often aligns with diplomatic and economic objectives, raising questions about the independence of scholarship. Institutions such as the Turkish Historical Society (Türk Tarih Kurumu, TTK) and Ircica play pivotal roles in promoting narratives that support Turkey's geopolitical ambitions, blending academic discourse with state-driven agendas.

'Ottoman Africa' invocation also intersects with Turkey's religious diplomacy. By framing its engagement as a continuation of Ottoman-era Islamic governance, Ankara reinforces its shared values and mutual respect narrative. This framing appeals to African nations seeking alternatives to neo-colonial paradigms while aligning with Turkey's broader cultural influence strategy. However, the selective nature of this narrative often marginalises the agency of African actors, privileging a Turkish-centric interpretation of history that aligns with contemporary goals (Lafi 2024).

In Erdoğan's rhetoric, 'Ottoman Africa' becomes both a historical reference and a forward-looking vision. He frequently emphasises Turkey's role as a partner in addressing shared challenges, such as terrorism, development, and public health, framing these initiatives within the language of solidarity and mutual benefit. While effective in differentiating Turkey from Western powers, this approach often masks asymmetrical power dynamics inherent in Ankara's policies, where historical narratives serve as tools for advancing strategic interests. Yet, African agency remains critical in shaping these engagements, challenging and adapting Turkey's narratives to align with local aspirations.

Ultimately, 'Ottoman Africa' encapsulates the duality of Turkey's engagement with the continent. As an academic concept, it offers a nuanced framework for understanding the Ottoman Empire's multifaceted relationships with Africa. As a political instrument, it enables Ankara to craft a narrative that reinforces its influence while aligning historical memory with contemporary ambitions. This dual use underscores the strategic interplay between academic scholarship and state objectives, while also highlighting the centrality of African agency in shaping both the past and the present of Ottoman-Africa relations.

Conclusion

Ottoman nostalgia operates as a dynamic tool in Turkey's African strategy, blending historical memory with geopolitical ambition. This narrative frames Turkey as a non-colonial partner grounded in shared Islamic values and historical ties, enabling Ankara to project itself as a bridge between tradition and modernity. By mobilising a romanticised Ottoman past, Turkey appeals to African leaders and societies seeking alternatives to Western paradigms of development and governance.

The invocation of historical connections often functions as a mechanism for constructing networks of influence in contemporary geopolitics (Winter 2022). For Turkey, this strategy entails crafting a usable past that selectively emphasises Islamic unity and benevolence themes while glossing over the more complex dimensions of the Ottoman Empire's involvement in Africa. These complexities include the Empire's oscillation between resisting European colonial domination and adopting imperial practices that served its strategic interests.

While geopolitical perspectives are valuable for understanding the material dimensions of Turkey's engagement, this study highlights the symbolic and discursive elements that are equally critical. An interdisciplinary approach rooted in historical and anthropological methodologies allows for a more nuanced analysis of Turkey's strategy, foregrounding the ways in which historical memory and cultural narratives intersect with power dynamics. By integrating insights from lieux de mémoire theory (Nora 1989), the analysis reveals how Turkey constructs sites of memory—both physical, such as restored mosques, and conceptual, such as Ottoman-African ties—to legitimise its actions and bolster its cultural influence. These frameworks move beyond the transactional focus of political science, exploring the affective and symbolic dimensions of Turkey's African outreach.

The revival of Ottoman memory reflects broader trends in mobilising imperial histories to reinforce state legitimacy (Gehler, and Rollinger 2022). Even after their decline, empires remain influential as enduring discourses, offering modern states a means to reassert their global presence. Turkey exemplifies this phenomenon, strategically reconstructing its Ottoman legacy to align with contemporary objectives in Africa. Through acts of cultural diplomacy, such as restoring Ottoman-era landmarks and promoting Islamic solidarity, Ankara embeds its geopolitical ambitions within a framework of historical continuity.

This selective revival also aligns with the analysis of sites of memory, where

memory becomes a space actively reshaped to serve political and ideological purposes (Walton 2016). In Turkey's case, these sites—whether physical, such as restored mosques, or conceptual, such as the invocation of Ottoman-African ties—are instrumental in projecting soft power and legitimising contemporary ambitions. However, a historical lens reveals the limitations of these narratives: the selective emphasis on unity and benevolence marginalises the diverse and contested realities of Ottoman governance.

While Turkey's invocation of Ottoman nostalgia and Islamic solidarity resonates most strongly in regions with historical or cultural ties to the Ottoman Empire or Islam, its narrative extends beyond these boundaries. The (pan) Ottomanist ideal, selectively revived in contemporary neo-Ottoman rhetoric, provides a theoretical framework for inclusion that encompasses regions without direct historical connections to the Empire. This inclusive model positions Turkey as a partner capable of bridging diverse identities and histories, offering a vision of pluralistic coexistence that transcends the boundaries of the Ottoman-Islamic world.

For instance, Turkey's outreach to sub-Saharan Africa, where Islamic and Ottoman ties are often less pronounced, reflects the flexibility of this approach. Ankara frames its engagement with these regions as part of a broader narrative of shared humanity and mutual development, grounded in principles of equality and partnership. This framing allows Turkey to position itself as a global actor that transcends colonial and neo-colonial paradigms, appealing to African nations seeking alternatives to Western-dominated models of development and diplomacy.

This dual strategy of nostalgia and pragmatism underscores the complexity of Turkey's African policy. On the one hand, Ankara presents itself as a culturally aligned and historically connected partner, resonating particularly in regions like North and East Africa, where Islam remains central to societal structures. On the other hand, this narrative masks the asymmetrical dynamics inherent in Turkey's engagement, where historical and cultural rhetoric often serves as a veneer for strategic economic and political ambitions.

Beyond its attempt to differentiate itself from former colonial powers, Ankara's strategy reflects the pressures of competing with emerging global actors in Africa. States like China, Russia, India, and Gulf nations have increasingly invested in the continent, vying (Siradağ 2020) for influence through infrastructure projects, military cooperation, and economic partnerships. Turkey's selective revival of Ottoman memory allows it to position itself as a culturally

resonant and historically legitimate player, leveraging its Islamic and Ottoman heritage to gain a competitive edge over these new entrants. By framing its involvement within a narrative of Islamic solidarity and mutual respect, Turkey seeks to distinguish itself from colonial legacies and the transactional approaches often associated with contemporary competitors.

Memory is not a passive repository but an active force that shapes political realities (Nora 1989). In Turkey's case, Ottoman nostalgia operates as both a soft power instrument and a mechanism for differentiating itself from Western colonial legacies and other global competitors. By invoking its Ottoman-Islamic heritage, Turkey positions itself as a unique actor in Africa, distinct from the exploitative practices of former colonial powers and the opportunistic strategies of emerging players. However, this framing selectively foregrounds the Empire's achievements while marginalising the agency of African actors and the complexities of Ottoman-African interactions.

Turkey's use of Ottoman nostalgia ultimately illustrates the interplay between historical memory, identity, and power in contemporary international relations. Historical narratives are not merely retrospective but forward-looking, shaping the contours of modern statecraft (Winter 2022). By blending nostalgia with pragmatic engagement, Turkey reinforces its influence in Africa while navigating the challenges of maintaining authenticity in its historical claims. The deployment of historical narratives can obscure historical complexities, potentially limiting the capacity for equitable partnerships and mutual respect (Gehler, and Rollinger 2022a).

If Ottoman nostalgia is so central to Turkey's engagement with Africa, to what extent does it truly foster equal partnerships with African states? While selective historical memory serves as a tool of legitimacy, it may also impose limitations when official narratives encounter the complexities of local dynamics. Is Ankara genuinely building a partnership based on shared values, or is it constructing a past that primarily serves its global ambitions?

This article demonstrates that interdisciplinary approaches, combining historical depth with anthropological nuance, are indispensable for unpacking the complexities of Turkey's African engagement, leaving space for further research and academic debate. By moving beyond reductionist frameworks, it bridges the material and symbolic dimensions of international relations, offering a comprehensive understanding of how historical memory and cultural narratives intersect with geopolitical strategies. A genuinely transformative relationship between Turkey and Africa must move beyond selective memory,

embracing a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of shared histories and their implications for future cooperation.

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Notes

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6 - For detailed information on the partnership between Turkey and the African Union, see the official sites of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs: cd.mfa.gov.tr (last accessed on 29 April 2025); and the African Union: au.int/en (last accessed 29 April 2025).

7 - *Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan'ın Afrika ziyaretinin parolası: Daha adil bir dünya mümkün*, "TRT Haber", 21 October 2021, www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/cumhurbaskani-erdoganin-afrika-ziyaretinin-parolasi-daha-adil-bir-dunya-mumkun-619016.html (last accessed 29 April 2025).

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9 - This data is available in real-time via the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs' official resource, "Diplomatic Missions" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey): cd.mfa.gov.tr/mission/mission-list?clickedId=3 (last accessed 29 April 2025).

10 - To mention a few examples of the educational offerings in this field, the African

Studies master's degree programme at Ankara University was launched in 2009 as an interdisciplinary programme aiming to conduct scientific research and analysis on the African continent while also contributing to the training of researchers with expertise in the subject matter, see: bbs.ankara.edu.tr/Amac_Hedef.aspx?bno=3496&bot=612 (last accessed on 29 April 2025). Additionally, the African Studies and International Relations degree at Istanbul Ticaret University is an interdisciplinary programme that examines the African region from the perspective of the discipline of International Relations, see: ticaret.edu.tr/sosyal-bilimler-enstitusu/en/masters-program-in-african-studies-and-international-relations/ (last accessed 19 April 2025).

11 - Foreign Policy Regions Sub-Saharan Africa, Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-africa-relations.en.mfa (last accessed 29 April 2025). The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) publish such statistics regularly on their websites. See Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), www.ytb.gov.tr (last accessed 29 April 2025).

12 - The Diplomacy Academy, operated by the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, offers training programs for foreign diplomats, including many from Africa. Details on these initiatives are often available on the Ministry's official website. See Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, "Diplomacy Academy", www.mfa.gov.tr (last accessed 29 April 2025).

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17 - For detailed information on Turkey's development and cooperation efforts in Africa, the Agency's official website (TİKA) has been instrumental in providing reports and press releases, which I used to conduct a discourse analysis of Turkey's engagement in Africa. While this analysis informs the present article's broader perspective, the site offers specific insights into the projects and speeches of Turkish leaders. For further details, see: www.tika.gov.tr (last accessed 29 April 2025).

18 - For an insight into the Diyanet's charitable initiatives in Africa, please refer to their official website, which outlines their humanitarian efforts and commitment to providing aid

in the region. See “Diyanet’s Charitable Activities in Africa” available at bagis.tdv.org/krizbolgeleri/afrika-3 (last accessed 29 April 2025).

19 - Initially, the Gülen movement played a significant role in Turkey’s soft power strategies across Africa, particularly in education, business, and humanitarian aid. Between 2003 and 2014, the movement’s schools, business networks, and civil society organisations complemented Turkey’s growing diplomatic and economic engagements in SSA, especially after the 2005 African Action Plan. Inspired by Fethullah Gülen’s teachings, the movement’s schools became central in promoting Turkish culture, establishing networks with local elites, and furthering Turkey’s public diplomacy efforts.

However, the 2016 coup attempt led to a drastic shift in the Turkish government’s view of the Gülen movement, now labelled as a terrorist organisation (FETÖ). As a result, Turkey intensified efforts to dismantle the movement’s institutions abroad, particularly in Africa, where Gülenist schools and businesses were well-established. Ankara pressured African governments to shut down Gülenist institutions, replacing them with the Maarif Foundation, a state-backed educational organisation (Donelli 2019).

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